

A Ninth Congressional District Emergency Responders Conference: Funding Available to Protect the People Who Protect Us (March 13, 2006)

Abingdon, Virginia

Let me welcome you to our Ninth Congressional District Emergency Responders Conference: Funding Available to Protect the People Who Protect Us. This morning, our topic is one that is critical to every Southwest Virginia resident. It is our goal to ensure that our region's emergency responders are well informed about the resources available to support their departments and know how to access the funding.

In times of emergency, members of fire departments, rescue squads, and police and sheriffs departments respond rapidly and efficiently to provide our first line of defense. Southwest Virginia's emergency responders are generous members of our society who risk personal safety for the public good. It is only fitting that these individuals have access to the best equipment and training possible.

In the Ninth District, many departments providing emergency services are located in rural areas and small communities, and many are made up of volunteer members. It is often difficult for these communities to provide funds to update emergency equipment or training for emergency responders. Sometimes departments find it necessary to seek assistance from the federal and state government.

Many fire departments, rescue squads, and police and sheriffs departments in Southwest Virginia have been successful in obtaining the funding necessary to purchase equipment or to finance other high-cost department needs. Nearly every community in the Ninth District has benefitted from the federal assistance provided to Southwest Virginia's emergency responders.

Each year, I participate with a number of emergency response organizations in the effort to obtain federal funding necessary to protect their members. Last year, over \$3.5 million was awarded to over forty departments in the Ninth Congressional District by the federal government. These funds were used to purchase items including police vehicles, fire trucks, ambulances, turn-out gear, and communication devices; however, there is a continuing need for the provision of new and safe equipment, up-to-date training, and state-of-the-art facilities to meet the needs of Southwest Virginia's emergency responders.

Our conference begins this morning with a presentation from my friends Sally Hamer and Travis Jackson, Area Directors for U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Agency. This agency plays an important role in providing assistance to emergency responders. In 2005, Rural Development provided over \$250,000 in grant funds to emergency response organizations to fund such items as police cars, fire trucks, ambulances, and to build an emergency helicopter landing pad at one of our region's hospitals. This morning, Sally and Travis will discuss the grant programs available to emergency responders through the Rural Development agency and how to submit applications to these programs.

Following the Rural Development agency presentation, Vicky Murphy with the Department of Homeland Security will give an overview of the Assistance to Firefighters Grant program.

We will also have presentations from representatives of some of Virginia's state agencies. Buddy Hyde, the Executive Director of the Virginia Department of Fire Programs, will discuss the resources available to firefighters through his department. He will be followed by representatives of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management and the Virginia State and Federal Surplus Program.

Concluding our conference, we have assembled a panel of emergency responders from across the region who have been successful in the effort to obtain federal grant funds for the purchase of new and updated equipment for their departments. These individuals will discuss their successful partnerships with several federal agencies and answer your questions on the federal grant process.

If you have questions after the conference or are in need of assistance with the federal grant process, please do not hesitate to contact my office. My staff stands ready to assist you in any way possible.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank these exceptional speakers for their participation in the conference this morning. I am certain you will find their presentations informative and enjoyable.

I would also like to thank Rachel Fowlkes and the staff of the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center for their excellent assistance in the planning of this conference.

Finally, I would like to recognize my Chief of Staff, Becky Coleman, my District Director, Laura Lee and my Project Manager, Courtney Lamie, for their work in organizing this conference and the exceptional line up of speakers who will be participating today.